

To: Whom It May Concern

From: Dr. Jeffery D. Long
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Subject: The wording “Brahman, an all-pervading divine supreme reality, may be manifested in many ways, including incarnation in the form of Deities.”
(Edit #2488, Page 213, lines 843-844)

I wish to recommend that this particular wording be changed in order to more accurately reflect the Hindu theological perspective that the text in question is trying, imperfectly, to convey. My expertise in this area is as a professor of Hinduism who has published and taught over the course of the last two decades, specifically upon Hindu theological topics, including the topic of the manifestation of Brahman as the various Hindu Deities.

The main concern with the present wording is the term “incarnation,” which is not really appropriate when applied to the supreme Brahman in Hindu thought. “Incarnation,” first of all, is a term that is so widely associated with the Christian tradition that its use in a Hindu setting imports certain Christian assumptions into the conversation that do not, in fact, pertain in that setting. It implies, for example, a strong dualism of spirit and matter that only some, but not all, Hindu schools of thought affirm. According to widespread Hindu schools of thought such as Śaivism and Advaita Vedānta, what is generally taken to be the material world is a manifestation of consciousness to itself, and so analogous to a dream state. One does not “incarnate” into one’s own dreams, but manifests or appears in them.

Beyond this point, however, the term “incarnation,” even if it is going to be used in a Hindu context, applies better to the phenomenon of the *avatāra*, or avatar, in which a specific Hindu deity—typically Viṣṇu—who resides in a specific realm of the cosmos—the Viṣṇu Loka, or Vaikunṭha, as it is also known—projects a form of Himself into the realm in which human beings dwell. Even in this case, “projection” or “manifestation” would be better translations than “incarnation.” (The literal meaning is “descent.”) There is an important distinction—several, really—between Viṣṇu’s projections into the mundane parts of the universe and Brahman’s manifestation as the various Hindu Deities. Brahman is not located in one place and projecting Itself into another. Brahman is beyond time and space altogether, a wholly transcendent entity. In fact, even the term “entity” is not quite appropriate for Brahman, which is really the ground of being itself. Incarnation, if we wish to use this term for the avatar phenomenon, is an act of will undertaken by a Deity. Brahman, though, is beyond all such activities. Being outside of time and space, use of the terms “will” or “act” of Brahman would be, at best, metaphorical, and at worst, not at all accurate. The manifestation of Brahman as the various Deities is a spontaneous, not an act of will, and is, according to some Hindu schools of thought, better conceived as a matter of our perception of Brahman rather than any “activity” on Brahman’s part.

The wording I recommend in place of the current text is: “Brahman, the all-pervading divine Supreme Reality, manifests as the various Deities with multiple names and forms, which represent divine aspects and power.” “Manifests” is more neutral in regard to agency than “incarnates” and does not convey the mistaken meaning of a personal Deity located in one part of the cosmos projecting Him or Herself into another. It is more true to Hindu schools of thought and is sufficiently neutral to command the assent of a wider array of Hindus than the current wording.